

HOW CAN I CARE FOR MY CHILDREN?

A HANDBOOK FOR PARENTS STRUGGLING WITH DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE

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INTRODUCTION

Alcohol and drugs have become part of many people's lives. A quiet evening at home or a dinner with friends may include a glass of wine or a bottle of beer. At the same time, substance abuse problems have increased. The purpose of this guide is to offer parents some perspectives to consider when reflecting on what their drug or alcohol use means for their children, as well as ideas on how to make sure their children are doing as well as possible. The guide is for anyone interested in the issue of parental drug or alcohol use, but it has been written specifically for those parents whose own use, or a spouse's use, is a problem. The minds and hearts of these parents are often weighed down by a heavy and unspoken concern for their children. Substance abuse and mental health professionals may also find this guide useful as a basis for discussions. And just to be clear, the term "children" includes any youth or adolescents who are part of the family.



INTOXICANTS, THE MIND, AND CHILDREN

Where this guide is coming from

Like all parents, parents who use drugs and alcohol want the best for their children. A substance abuse problem may complicate things, but there are still plenty of things parents can do to support their children and prevent problems. In terms of a child's development, it is important that problems be dealt with openly and solutions sought. This guide is intended to help parents in this task.

This guide refers to intoxicants, which includes drugs, alcohol, and prescription medications abused for the purpose of intoxication. Intoxicant use can be understood in a variety of ways. It may be part of relaxation or socializing, or a way of easing sadness, heartache, or anger. It may be an expression of culture, illness, or disorder; it may be linked to crime. This guide does not take a stance on these issues. The sole purpose is to consider how to best support children, not debate the nature or phenomenon of intoxicant use.

Intoxicant use results from the combined effect of cultural, psychological, psychiatric, physical, and social factors. Problematic use often ends up being linked to a variety of these background factors. A person suffering from depression or anxiety may begin to use intoxicants to make themselves feel better. On the flip side, the use of intoxicants may cause or aggravate psychological problems and physical illnesses. Dependency can sneak up on a person without them noticing.

In this guide, a parent's repeated intoxication is defined as a substance abuse problem, because it is known to endanger the development of the child. No other definition is necessary. Solving and treating this problem is important both for the user and their family. But recovering from a substance abuse problem is a slow process, full of ups and downs. Sometimes it takes a while to see results. The purpose of this guide is to help the entire family live as good a life as possible during this phase.

The guides "How can I help my children? A guide for parents who have mental health problems" and "What's up with our parents? A handbook for older children and adolescents whose mother or father has mental health problems" (Solantaus, illustrations by Ringbom) may also be useful for parents who use intoxicants and their children.



Intoxicants and the mind

Drugs and alcohol have wide-ranging effects on the way the human mind functions. Even a mild state of intoxication is the result of an intoxicant's effect on the brain. The person using hopes first and foremost for pleasant sensations: a shy or reserved person hopes to become bolder, a sad person hopes to forget their sorrows. Although intoxicants have a powerful effect on emotional experiences and behavior, the end result is difficult to control. The mind may be inundated by joy and happiness, followed immediately by gloom and anxiety. Intoxicants act as irritants to the brain, which means the smallest thing can upset or anger the person using them.

From a child's point of view, intoxicants can make a parent and family life unpredictable and, in many ways, frightening.



Child development and the family

A child's development depends to a great extent on the atmosphere in the home, as well as the kinds of personal relationships the child has and how well they work. The same goes for the well-being of adult family members, too. The child needs to be able to share joys and sorrows at home. They need love and intimacy, they need guidance, looking after, and the fulfillment of many needs. Together, these form the child's sense of security. This demands sensitivity, patience, and consistency on the part of the parent. It means placing the child first. The parent has to be flexible about their own needs, during celebrations as well as everyday life.

A family is a tight-knit, interactive group, where every member affects everyone else. Inside a family, silence and holding back also become forms of interaction. The smile of a family member who is in a good mood can be contagious, but if someone is grumpy, it can put others in a bad mood too. Moods and emotions are experienced together and shared. This is the strength of a family, but it also leads to vulnerability. Shifts in mood, including intoxication, always become a part of the whole family's life.

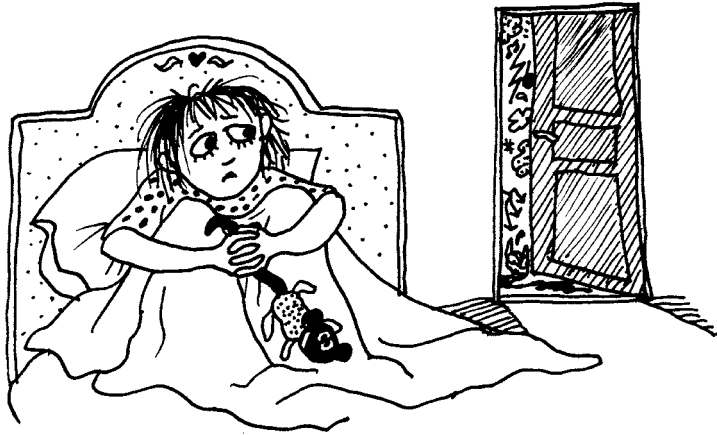
The problematic forms of intoxicant-influenced behavior

The problematic effects of drugs and alcohol emerge during our interactions with others. Drugs and alcohol lead to a kind of self-centeredness, where our own needs are strong, demand immediate fulfillment, and feel entirely justified. At the same time, they smother our sensitivity to others' needs and interests. We may end up expecting too much of a child, or misinterpreting their actions. A toddler's crying or an adolescent's irritability may feel like intentional harassment. Intoxicants weaken impulse control, meaning we act without thinking, buffeted by emotions and mood swings.

Inconsistency, indifference, and hurtfulness enter the family. A caring and loving parent might turn into someone completely different when using alcohol or drugs. This is why they are capable of snapping at a crying child – "Be quiet, no one wants to hear you bawl!" – instead of offering comfort. It is completely understandable that the child's feelings range from insecurity and fear to anger, irascibility, depression, and hopelessness.

A parent who is hung over may not even be in control of his or her bodily functions, which can feel humiliating and shameful. The physical and psychological symptoms of hangover and withdrawal can be so frightening that the parent may feel they will not survive. Sometimes children end up staying home from school to make sure their parents are OK.





Children may see and experience situations that are too much for someone their age to handle. It is hard for them to express powerful emotions like rage and anger, fear and panic, sadness and hopelessness, as well as possibly disgust, shame, and hatred, because they threaten the delicate balance of the home. Children end up growing feelers on their foreheads to sense subtly shifting situations. The parent's condition and swings in it begin to define the course of the child's life.

This state of affairs is clearly awkward for everyone involved. The parent who uses drugs or alcohol never meant for things turn out this way, and often feels a powerful sense of inferiority without being able to do anything about it. The children and the spouse wrestle with pent-up emotions and feel like they are in a dead-end situation. From the point of view of everyone involved, it is absolutely crucial that ways of alleviating the situation be sought.





Factors that can support children and the family

Thanks to studies and what families have told us, we already know some things that can support a child's development and family life even if problems exist.

For a child, it is critically important that parents be able to see things from the child's perspective, that parents understand what the child is going through and why he or she behaves a certain way – why a preschooler clings to a pant leg, or why a teen-ager talks back. Children are also relieved when they are helped to understand where a parent's behavior is coming from. This is how an understanding the issue's significance for the children gradually starts to grow within the family. And that offers a foundation for thinking about problems constructively and coming up with solutions.

It is absolutely essential that the family do things they enjoy together, and that drugs or alcohol do not dominate family life. It is vital for parents to support the children's life outside the home as well. Good friendships with children and grown-ups, as well as hobbies and constructive activities, bring joy to a child's life and help them develop social skills. Family activities, friends, and social networks also sustain parents during difficult times as well.

All of this requires constructive and honest conversations about the problematic drug or alcohol use and potential solutions – conversations with the spouse and family, and gradually with the family's social network. One good foundation for discussion is an action plan that kicks in when drug or alcohol use occurs. The action plan takes everyone's needs, especially those of the children, into account. Talking about a drug or alcohol problem is never easy, though.



TURNING UNDERSTANDING INTO AN ACTION PLAN

Talking can be tough

Every member of the family learns to recognize the rituals of drug and alcohol use and silently wonders how they could stop it, what they could have done or left undone. Aside from being very hard on children, this lonely contemplation is completely unnecessary: cares are meant to be shared. What keeps families from talking openly?

As parents, we want to protect our children – we are afraid that talking will burden them even further. Perhaps we do not really approve of our own behavior, and talking about it simply feels too hard. We cannot find the words; we do not have any solutions. But not talking leaves every member of the family, including the children, to make it on their own, without each others' support. Open discussion may also be hampered because the parent who uses drugs or alcohol does not feel like there is a problem.

Sometimes talk is replaced by bribing. The parent brings home gifts, or promises the moon and the stars. Even little children get the message: "Just don't ask about yesterday." Reconsidering this strategy might be worthwhile, however, because for children this is an important learning opportunity: how do I handle a situation that is hard for me? Probably one of the toughest things about being a parent is having the courage to face a situation where you are the cause of your child's difficulties.

The first step in supporting your child is to understand how important you are to him or her, and to think about your strengths, your family's strengths, and the things that are going well. The next step is to try and understand what your behavior might have meant for your child. Then you can move on to talking constructively about problems and coming up with solutions.





Identifying your strengths

When problems pile up at home and at work, when we are worried about our children's welfare, ourselves and our spouses, our thoughts and lives start revolving around problems. This goes for both the person who is using drugs or alcohol as well as their spouse. Good moments, big and small, pass by without our noticing, or feel insignificant compared to our feelings of inadequacy. "I don't have anything to offer my children" – this experience is familiar to many. Feelings of inferiority stifle the goodness that does exist and that it is vital that you find and nourish for you and your children.

The first thing to do is to take a quiet moment and think about the things you have done well and that you have enjoyed together as a family. Write them down, so you do not forget. Ask your children and spouse to help! We are not talking about trips or other big events here, just everyday things: walking down to the store together, hugging the children when they come home from school, giving the baby a smile. These may feel insignificant, but they are incredibly important. And do not give up if a grouchy teenager says you have never done anything fun. – As you are making the list, all the things you have left undone will flood into your mind. Do not worry about them at this point.

Then look at your list. Is there anything you could do more often, either alone or together as a family? Pick one thing and start from there.





Identifying your challenges

In addition to your strengths, you also need to think about your challenges. This is not easy, so take it one step at a time. There are a lot of details related to your own or your spouse's drug or alcohol use that are hard to accept – things that are embarrassing, shameful, or distressing to admit. Try to remember that you are not the only one who is ever behaved this way, that everything is related to the psychological and social effects of drugs and alcohol.

The ability to look at yourself, at issues in the home and with the children, and to draw conclusions based on what you see indicates strength of character and a sense of responsibility. So does asking for help. Are we doing fine or are some changes called for? Can we make the changes as a family or do we need help? Do we have friends or relatives who we can ask to support us, or might it be best to seek assistance from professionals, too?





"My drinking isn't a problem"

Spouses often have differences of opinion regarding drug or alcohol use. The person using says there is no problem, and the other person disagrees. Maybe it is possible to move forward if both spouses accept that everyone has their own opinion, and that different family members experience things differently.

Drugs and alcohol are used for how they make us feel, and so for the person using them, maybe they are not a problem. They believe that their behavior is completely normal. However, it is important both to realize and to dare to admit that even though something is not a problem for you, it might be for someone else.

The spouse's experience may be completely different. They've been forced to shoulder responsibility alone, take care of the home and the children, and sort out the other parent's messes. For their part, children talk about fears, difficulty sleeping, and anxiousness. Maybe they cannot concentrate on their homework or schoolwork, maybe they are afraid of the intoxicated parent or their parents arguing.

It is clear there is a problem here. Something has to be done. Does talking about these matters feel overwhelming? Does it just cause further arguments? Changing existing patterns of discussion is not easy. If there has already been a lot of arguing, turn to professional help: take this guide with you and explain that you want to discuss these issues. A professional can bring the necessary balance to conversations between the two of you.





Starting to talk

The goals of talking are for the parents to understand their child's experiences and needs, for the child to get explanations for what's happening in their family, and for the family to come up with solutions. The point is, then, to discuss the issues that have been problems for the child. It would be best if the parents would discuss matters together first and agree on what issues are going to be raised and when. A single parent can do this with a friend, or even alone, with the help of a pen and a piece of paper.

It is a good idea to choose some concrete, recent event, one you believe you can talk about with your child. Do not start with the most distressing or difficult issues. Their time will come, when you are ready for it and have some experience with the best ways of handling these talks.

In the following pages, we are going to go through a couple of sample conversations. We have chosen the topics of lying and breaking promises, because they happen in every family where someone uses drugs and alcohol to the point where it becomes a problem.



Lying

The parent who is using drugs or alcohol usually tries to hide it. This gradually leads to lying. Lying can spread from drug and alcohol use to many other aspects of life: it becomes a normal part of interaction. It may be surprising how easy it is to lie and how gullible the other members of the family are. It might even make you smile a little sometimes. It is a good idea to remember, though, that "gullibility" is a sign of trust. When gullibility disappears, trust vanishes, and maybe respect along with it. Is it really worth losing them?

For a child, a parent's lying is a serious thing. The parent is the person who is in charge of the child's life. A child believes and should be able to believe what their parent says. If this is not the case, the child's fundamental sense of security starts to crumble. When a child can no longer trust a parent, they are left to fend for themselves. They may also adopt lying as a normal part of interaction. That is something you probably do not want.

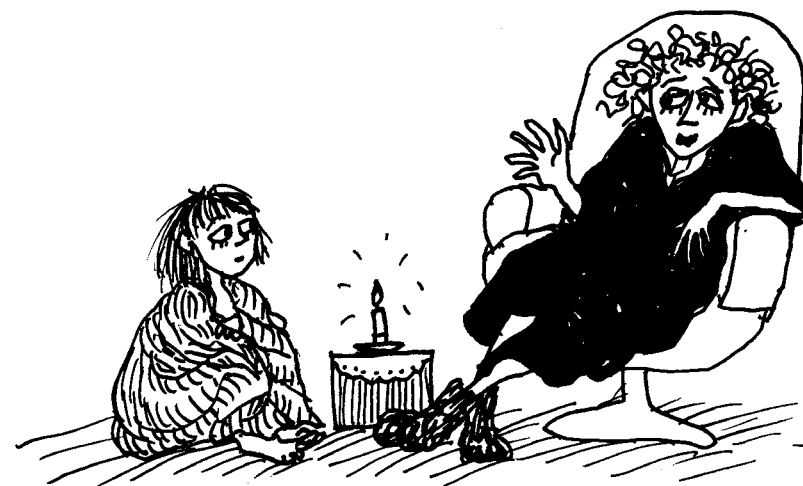
If lying is familiar to you, take a moment to think about how much and in what situations you do it. Talk to your spouse, too. Then take the matter up with the children.



Breaking promises

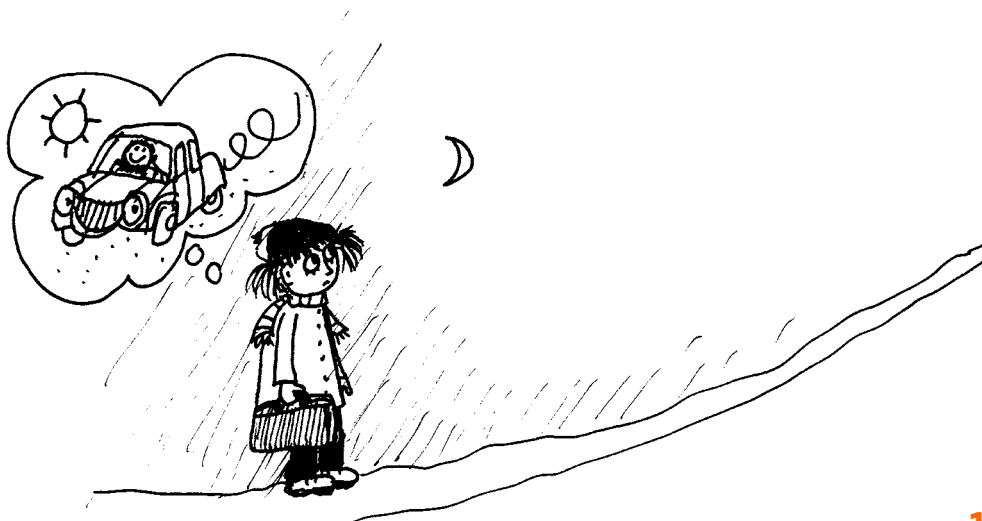
Another behavior that is commonly involved in drug and alcohol use is breaking promises. At a certain point in the cycle, drugs and alcohol become the most important thing to the person using them. The parent is constantly preoccupied with them; everything else is sidelined. This is understandable from the perspective of addiction. For children or a spouse, however, it carries a different meaning.

For a child, it might mean that Dad didn't think going on our Sunday outing was very important. Or that my party is going to embarrassingly canceled at the last minute, because it's more important for Mom to take a pill than to remember my birthday. Or that Dad doesn't even care enough about me to keep a promise and take me to the movies for once. It is not a matter of missing out on one event, but of something much deeper: how the parent respects and values their child as a person and as an object of love.



Broken promises lead to hopelessness, bitterness, and the shattering of trust. The most devastating consequence, though, is that the child begins to think they are such a bad person that they are not worthy of the promises made to them. As the scenario is repeated, the experience of inferiority starts to be integrated into the child's self-image, and may be reflected in future relationships far into adulthood.

Do the same thing as with lying. Go to your child and say you broke a promise and that you are sorry. Is there something you can still do to make it up? Your child also needs an explanation for why you did what you did.





Explaining substance abuse to a child

Children do not need lectures about the substance abuse problem. They need to understand why their parent uses drugs or alcohol even though it has unpleasant consequences. They need the chance to share their own thoughts and experiences and the opportunity to participate in making a joint action plan. Listen to your child and ask what they have felt, seen, and thought. This will help you to understand them. Do not talk to a young child the same way you would to an older one. Long monologues without the chance to ask questions can lead to misunderstandings.

Every time you talk to your child about problems that affect them and the family, you need to have a vision of how you will move forward together. If a parent has a mental health, substance abuse, or other health-related problem, it is important for the child to hear that the parent wants to get better and get rid of the problem, that they are in treatment and getting help from professionals. It is always a relief for children to hear that a parent is seeking assistance and taking care of themselves.

Explaining a substance abuse or mental health problem to a child is not possible within the framework of a single conversation: understanding develops little by little, in everyday situations in the home, over days, weeks, months, even years. Children are continuously growing and understanding things in new ways.

Tell your story

Start by talking about the first times you used drugs or alcohol. Perhaps the emphasis at this point is on the pleasant effects, such as feeling relaxed, free, and comfortable with others. Or maybe life was so difficult that drugs or alcohol entered the picture to offer some momentary oblivion. Gradually a dependency formed. You felt bad if you didn't use, you didn't feel better until you were intoxicated. The addiction wasn't something you wanted, but you didn't see it coming, nor did you understand what it meant.

Explain about the cycle and symptoms of addiction. There is the stage building up to use, then starting to use, continuing, quitting, the hangover, then the times between use. Ask your children what they have seen and thought and explain what you feel during the various stages.

Discuss the forms of behavior related to the use of drugs and alcohol. Ask your child what he or she has observed. Children often find it difficult to say anything very negative about a parent, so the parent has to raise these issues themselves. Try to come up with solutions together. Could someone else help your child with their homework or take them to sports or other activities when you cannot? Is there an adult who could act as a support person for your child? Take your children along for your treatment appointments and get staff backup for your discussions.





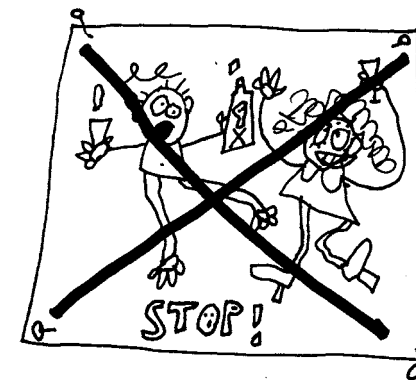
Respect the home as a haven for your children. It must be clearly agreed in the action plan that friends are not invited over to use intoxicants or if they are already intoxicated. A home is more than walls, a roof, and a floor. It is the child's most important development environment, where the child – and all adults – should be able to live in peace and tranquility.

The aforementioned solutions demand that some other place be found for the children or for the parent using drugs or alcohol. This does not always happen. Even then, it is important for you to talk and think about what the plan is when drugs or alcohol are used. Maybe social services can arrange a support family. Moving to a shelter is always a must if the threat of psychological or physical violence exists in the family.

When a parent is intoxicated – The action plan

The goal of talking openly is that things can be predicted and solutions found. To do this, we need an action plan. Many families have decided that intoxication never takes place in the home. If parents are planning to get intoxicated during dinner or a party, they spend the evening elsewhere. They also agree on who will care for the child during that time. If a longer period of intoxication is expected, the parent in question goes elsewhere for that period.

If no such place exists, in some families the children go to grandma's and grandpa's or to a friend's or a support family's home for the period of intoxication. It is an unfortunately uncommon occurrence that children are not removed from the premises until late at night, after the drug or alcohol use has already gotten out of hand. Things do not have to happen this way, if an action plan for these situations has been made in advance.





The flip side of the action plan

It is also important to make an action plan for the rest of the family for times when drugs or alcohol are used. Otherwise there is the risk that time is wasted on stress and worry. Some options include relaxed family nights with stories and pizzas, maybe going to the movies, a Sunday outing, or just spending some nice time together. Make sure the whole family is present when this plan is made. It is important for the parent who uses drugs or alcohol to participate, too. The action plan is always created in a calm and constructive atmosphere, never under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

This side of the action plan is just as important as the other one. It lets children know that they have both the right and the opportunity to do fun things and that life goes on despite the parent's drug or alcohol use. Intoxicants no longer rule the family's whole life. It does mean that the family is going to have to learn new habits, though, and at the beginning this can be a little confusing for everybody. The parent who uses drugs or alcohol might be afraid that no one cares about them anymore, since everyone else is having fun. And the rest of the family may feel guilty: "Can we really do this?" When it comes down to it, though, it is simply a matter of a jointly decided plan that takes the various needs of different family members into account.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Train your sensitivity to seeing your child's experiences

The ability to take an interest in what's important to others suffers during difficult periods in our lives, but it is possible to strengthen our sensitivity to observing our children's feelings and experiences. It is not always easy, though, because children try to cover up their feelings if they are in conflict with the parent. Children's reactions are revealed in expressions, gestures, behavior, and comments.

Take a second to think about your children. They can teach you much more about yourself than any book can. How can you tell if your child is happy, enthusiastic, sad, or angry? What kinds of things and situations generate those feelings? When did your child last keel over laughing, and at what? When did you last laugh together? When did you last babble with your baby, or sit on the floor playing with your toddler?

What about your drug or alcohol use, how does your child react to it? Do they follow you out of the corner of their eye when you get a beer from the fridge and look away as soon as you turn towards them? When you ask them what's wrong, do they mumble "nothing" and go away?



Does your child become grouchy or even fearful when you are intoxicated? Does your preschooler start fussing and cling to you or the other parent? Has your baby become very quiet? Do you see your teenagers around the house at all, have they used drugs or alcohol themselves? A child's age affects how they react. Does your child bring friends around, or do not they dare to, because they do not know what state you'll be in? Or has your child's behavior at daycare or school changed?

It is not easy coming up with answers to these questions right off the bat. Discuss the matter with your spouse. Maybe the two of you will be surprised. Children are more sensitive and observant than adults think. Children also react to changes that adults consider positive. The exaggerated good mood and hugs of an intoxicated parent might feel unpleasant to a child. It is important to understand that intoxicant-influenced behavior means different things to different members of the family.



Undo your child's sense of guilt

Many children feel that, one way or the other, they are to blame for a parent using drugs or alcohol and for the arguments between their parents. "If I had brought home a better report card, if I had behaved better yesterday, Dad wouldn't have started drinking." Sometimes a parent even blames the child more or less deliberately: "I cannot stand to listen to you guys fight anymore" – and then Mom grabs the bottle. The only thing children can do here is blame themselves.

Self-blame is something that no child should have to deal with. "I'm so bad that my parent drinks," is such a harsh experience that it will crush children of any age, from toddlers to older adolescents. Children often cause a lot of stress and worry, but if a parent reacts by using drugs or alcohol, that is the adult's fault. Make sure your children do not blame themselves, and if you blame them in a fit of irritation, correct things as soon as you realize what you have done. Do not forget to do this!

Give your child the experience of feeling good and appreciated

It is vital for a child to feel that they are a good child to their parents and that their parents find joy in them. Respect your significance to your children: you are important to them.

Enjoy your child's company, stop for some together time. Do not rush when you are changing the diapers – what a great opportunity to spend a moment together! Sit down next to your grade-schooler to watch some TV, make dinner with your teenager. Ask your child about his or her day. Get in touch with their daycare staff or teacher.

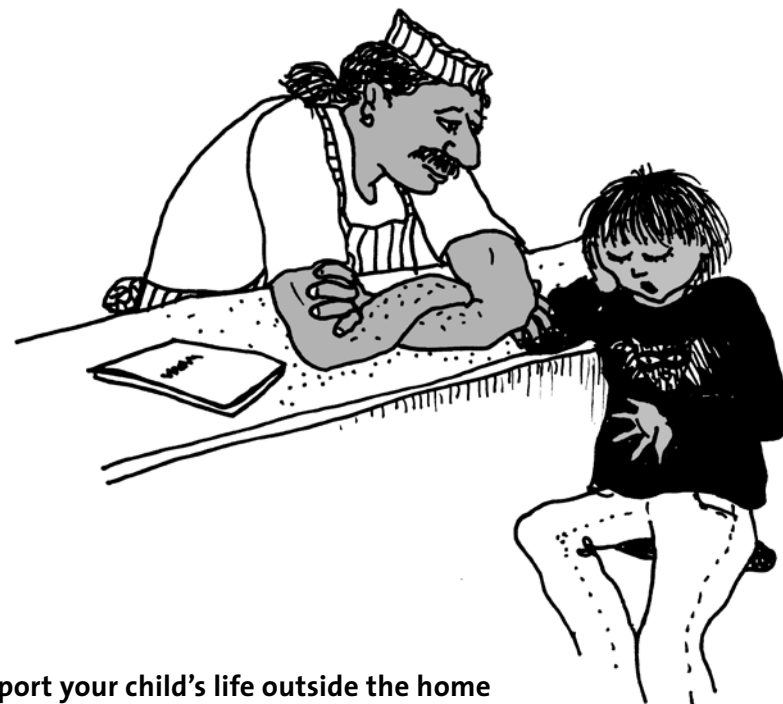
Make sure your family has together time during the holiday season, whether it is Christmas, Ramadan, or Chinese New Year. Celebrate your children's birthdays and make sure they make it to their friends' parties. Respect school performances and graduation ceremonies as important milestones for your children. Show that you are proud of your child's accomplishments, now matter how small.

If you have offended or hurt your child, say you are sorry and work things out with them. If your child is having trouble, get them help. This is also an act of love. Earlier, you made a list of things that you enjoy doing together. Keep using it. Have fun with your children!



Plan the housework

Everyday chores around the house easily get left undone if the parents' life is too stressful for one reason or another. Many children do all they can to try to take care of younger siblings, doing their laundry and making them food. Even though they may seem to be managing just fine, responsibility for the household is too heavy a burden even for adolescent children. If this has been allowed to happen, it is time to make a change. Can the housework be divided up fairly among everyone, or is there cause to call in outside help, for instance from family services?



Support your child's life outside the home

Everyone has areas of life that are important to them. Daycare, school, and friends and hobbies play a vital role in a child's development and bringing richness to their lives. They can also sustain a child when things are tough at home. Think about how you could support your child's friendships and adult relationships outside the home.

Also, make sure you do not embarrass your children in their own environment. If a parent shows up intoxicated at a school open house, it is natural for the child to feel ashamed and wish the parent had stayed at home. The child might even find it difficult to go to daycare or school afterwards. If this has happened, ask your child's forgiveness. You would not want someone embarrassing you at your workplace either.

It would also be good if the child had at least one adult they trusted outside the family, an adult they could talk to openly about their own things. This could be an aunt, an uncle, a grandparent, a friend's parent, or maybe someone from daycare or a health or social services professional.



Consider how conflicts are resolved within the family

Differences of opinion exist in every family. If a family knows how to resolve problems, the children gain an important, long-term life skill. The capacity to resolve conflicts lies at the core of the success of human relationships. It is the ability to listen to others' opinions, justify your own, and make compromises. Unfortunately, drugs and alcohol pull the rug out from under all of this, leaving behind loud voices, threats, blaming and bad-mouthing others, maybe even violence in its various forms.

Arguments between parents are often among the most difficult and frightening experiences a child faces. In addition to threats and violence, insulting the human dignity of the other parent through mean-spirited name-calling is particularly damaging to children.

Children may also quarrel a lot at home due to tension in the atmosphere, their own stifled feelings, and the model provided by their parents. If things do not improve by themselves, do not wait to seek professional help. Good relationships can sustain siblings through domestic troubles, whereas long-lasting contention in the home is reflected in children's behavior for years to come.



Care for your child's psychological and physical safety

Drugs and alcohol can lead to loss of self-control and violence. Psychological violence includes invalidating others, putting them down, and using threats, such as the threat of leaving, violence, taking someone's property without their permission, or bad-mouthing them in front of the children. Physical violence may take the form of shoving, holding a child against their will, hitting, all the way up to the hardest forms of violence. Psychological and physical violence may be directed at children or the spouse. There is also the danger that one of the children is given the role of scapegoat. They are always guilty, "bad," and may be subjected to unreasonable punishment. In effect, this means being bullied by their parents.

In all of their forms, violence and the threat of violence are destructive for children, regardless of whether they are directed at the children themselves or the other parent. The child's basic sense of security suffers, and no development is possible when threats are looming overhead. For this reason, it is important from the perspective of all parties that intervention take place immediately after the first instance of violence. Violence can destroy the person resorting to it, the victim, and the entire family.



When both parents or a single parent uses drugs or alcohol

If a single parent or both parents use drugs or alcohol to problematic levels, there is no other adult within the family to see danger spots in the child's life. Children may be left with no one to look after them, get them to bed or daycare or school, make sure they do their homework, maybe even make sure they have clean clothes and food. Children may also have to care for their parents, put them to bed, and cover up for them.

This type of family situation hinders a child's healthy development. Because of its effects, problems in mental health and behavior may appear during childhood and adulthood. If this has been allowed to happen, immediately seek cooperation with child welfare services and local family services.

Cooperating with child welfare services

The use of drugs or alcohol can lead to parenthood foundering seriously. This may be evident in, for instance, inadequate caretaking, violence, or leaving the children alone at home or in dangerous situations outside the home. It might also mean asking too much of children in terms of caring for the home and younger siblings, for instance.

Seeking out the cooperation of child welfare services as soon as your own or your family's strength are in danger of failing is wise parenting. Child welfare services is there to prevent problems. This might mean help around the house, a support family, parental counseling, or something else, depending on where you live. The earlier you contact child welfare, the better they will be able to help your family.

Your child will be not placed outside the home unless other measures do not resolve the situation or the child needs urgent help. If it does happen, though, it is best if it is handled in good cooperation between child welfare services, the parents, and the child themselves. If physical or psychological violence is used in the family, child welfare services must be contacted immediately, for the safety of the children and the well-being of the entire family.



THE SPOUSE'S PERSPECTIVE



Facing increased responsibility for the family

The repeated use of drugs and alcohol leads to an imbalance in taking care of work and the home. It is more than a question of practical matters, it is one of emotional responsibility and having the strength to keep going. Plus, children are not always easy either, when there are problems in the family.

The spouse is the one who has to see the effects on the children and come to the relevant conclusions. The evaluation of a loved one's behavior is difficult, though, and demands that the spouse take a step back. When our problems pile up and our strength starts to ebb, sometimes it is not even humanly possible to step back and get some distance. This may be misinterpreted as conscious denial of problems.

In order to evaluate the situation, we need outside people and perspectives. This is when friends are worth their weight in gold. If they are not around, seek advice from professionals. The opportunity to get some distance and examine our own lives and that of our families can be one of the fruits of professional help.

One thing that can feel especially oppressive is that the person who uses drugs and alcohol promises over and over to mend their ways but keeps on slipping. The rollercoaster of gaining and losing hope is draining, especially if it is tied into a feeling of being betrayed. The spouse often feels powerful feelings of inadequacy regarding the children and feelings of despair and bitterness towards the parent using drugs and alcohol. Feelings of depression and anxiety are typical companions in the spouse's life, as well as their own gradual slide into drug or alcohol use. If you recognize these signs in yourself, seek help immediately. If long-lasting, feelings of depression and anxiety might lead to psychiatric problems, and drug or alcohol use to addiction.

Difficulties can also strengthen relationships and substance use problems do not have to undermine the basis of the relationship. Constructive discussions and seeking solutions together, getting and giving support as well as love and care, and having fun times together are key elements in resilient relationships.



Talking about a parent who uses drugs or alcohol

The spouse is frequently concerned about the relationship between the children and the parent using drugs or alcohol. Often the spouse tries to take responsibility for the relationship and hide the drug or alcohol use from the children: "Dad's in the hospital with a bad back," when he's really in rehab. By doing this, the spouse is hoping to protect the children from worrying. The other extreme is to bad-mouth the parent who is using drugs or alcohol.

The children are, of course, familiar with the parent's drug or alcohol use and its various consequences. Children need explanations and support for their observations as well as the chance and permission to love a parent, even one who is difficult – so what they need from the spouse is a realistic and constructive approach that does not include sugarcoating or bad-mouthing. The best ways to achieve this are by listening to your children's views, explaining things without making accusations, and thinking about how you are going to move forward together.



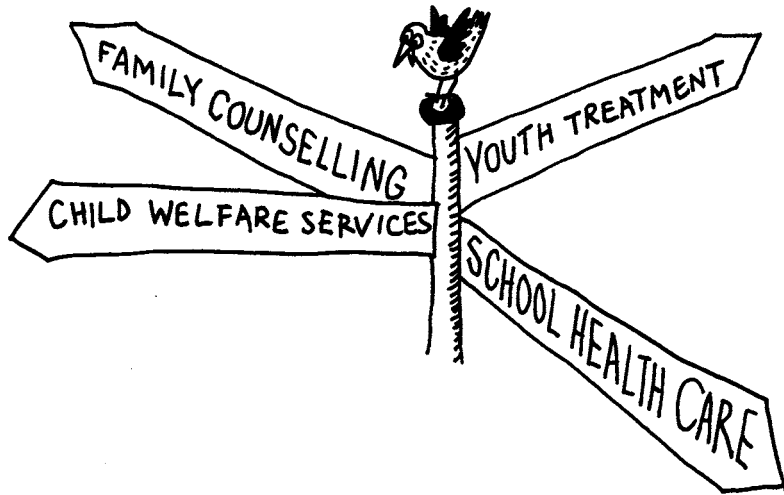
ASKING FOR HELP

Does my family need help?

In all families where a parent uses drugs or alcohol to the point where it is a problem, the matter needs to be discussed and solutions explored. If you need a hand around the house, friends and relatives can be surprisingly helpful if you just dare to ask. You can also ask for help from social services and volunteer organizations. It is very beneficial if the parents can confide in daycare and school staff, so the children receive understanding support there as well.

Both substance abuse and mental health services have a legal responsibility to support the children and families of their clients in Finland. To this end, the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare has cooperated with others to develop working methods that use the same approach as this guide. These Effective Child & Family working methods include the "Let's talk about children" discussion with parents, the Family Talk intervention, and Vertti peer groups for parents and children, as well as the Effective Child & Family network meeting, which can be used to bring together everyone who can help the family and children. These working methods are already in use in social and health services. You can also request counseling on the basis of this guide.





Does my child need professional help?

Parents are often rightfully concerned about the well-being of their children. Changes in demeanor, mood, and behavior are always alarming.

Restlessness and behavior problems, irritation, grumpiness, crying, difficulty sleeping, depression, and apathy are all indications that a child is not doing well, regardless of their age. A baby who cries all the time; a preschooler who is always squabbling or overly clinging; a school-age child who cries a lot or has trouble sleeping or concentrating; an adolescent who retreats behind the computer screen or into depression or drugs or alcohol are all instances that need to be taken seriously. Trouble getting to school is a concrete indication of a child's problems. Talk of suicide and violence demand you immediately seek care for your child.

It is better to act early than to wait too long. You can talk about your concerns, even those that feel small, with child health services, school health care, or your family doctor. All of these parties will refer your family and children onward as needed.



Will my child have a substance abuse problem, too?

The attitudes of children and young people towards drugs and alcohol are affected by their family culture and the ways young people use drugs and alcohol in society in general. Attitudes towards drugs and alcohol in the home can protect a young person or direct them towards intoxicant use. Parental intoxication and stories about "good buzzes" are a powerful message to children as to whether getting intoxicated is acceptable, or even desirable. If alcohol is, on the other hand, drunk only with meals or guests but intoxication is not part of the picture, this gives children a good foundation to face the prolific drug and alcohol use that is part of youth culture.

Possible hereditary predispositions also play a role in drug and alcohol problems. If such problems have appeared in the family before, it may be that the child is exceptionally sensitive to developing an addiction. However, other conditions also affect the emergence of substance abuse problems, such as the accessibility of drugs and alcohol and the habits of the child's circle of friends. A good foundation in the home does not always protect a young person from substance abuse, if many other factors lead them that way. But it can still be important in terms of later rehabilitation.

Parents ought to be on their guard about adolescent use and circles of friends. Use of alcohol is more or less mandatory among young people today, in order for them to feel like they belong to their peer group. This means that alcohol washes over the entire age group, fingering out those young people for addiction who are predisposed because of hereditary or life-situational reasons. Good hobbies and constructive activities with friends act as protective factors against drug and alcohol use.



IN CONCLUSION

Family life is never problem-free, nor does it have to be for the healthy growth and development of children. The important thing is that issues are dealt with openly and solutions sought. It is not easy, especially when a parent's problems cause the difficulties. In these cases, it is important to know that children respect a parent who is honest and admits to their problems. Even during difficult times it is possible to move forwards, when the guiding force is respect for the viewpoints and needs of each family member, especially the children. The good of the children is always the good of the parents! It is also comforting to know that even if children have problems, help is available and treatment results are good. Difficulties are not a barrier to development, if we dare to look them in the eye and tackle them head-on.

Thank you

Writing this guide has been a long process and many have contributed their input to it. The team from the Kalliola development unit is "Perhe elämään" project offered their expertise for my use. Thank you for the worthwhile conversations! A special thanks also to those young people at Kalliola who shared their experiences of living with a parent who uses drugs or alcohol.

It has also been valuable hearing the opinions and reactions of parents who use drugs and alcohol to drafts of this guide. Thank you! I sincerely hope that readers continue to send in feedback; it helps us develop support services for parents and children. Write me at Tytti.Solantaus@thl.fi or at the National Institute for Health and Welfare, PO Box 30, 00271 Helsinki, Finland.



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